DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 371 983 SO 023 971

TITLE	Dealing with Differences: Conflict Resolution in Our Schools.
INSTITUTION	Educators for Social Responsibility, Cambridge, MA.
PUB DATE	91
NOTE	17p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Educators for Social Responsibility, 23 Garden Street, Cambridge, MA 02138 ($1.75).
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)
EDRS PRICE	MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	Community Cooperation; *Conflict Resolution; *Decision Making; Discussion; Elementary Secondary Education; *Individual Differences; Interpersonal Communication; Perspective Taking; *Problem Solving; Profiles; *Program Descriptions; *Racial Differences; *Social Differences
IDENTIFIERS	*Educators for Social Responsibility

ABSTRACT

A need exists in schools for conflict resolution programs to help young people deal with differences. This booklet describes the Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR) conflict resolution program. The program follows nine key concepts: (1) conflict is a part of life; (2) many conflict situations can achieve "win-win" solutions; (3) resolution of a conflict is not always possible; (4) conflict resolution is best taught in the context of a caring community characterized by cooperation, effective communication, emotional strength, appreciation of differences, and recognition of common purposes; (5) the ability to take other perspectives is central to dealing constructively with differences; (6) dialogue is an effective form for discussing controversial issues; (7) the study of interventions helps students begin to understand the underlying dynamics of conflict; (8) the awareness and appreciation of differences is important to cultivate in students; and (9) the roots of violence and social conflict often lie in inequality and injustice. Eleven distinguishing features of the ESR's approach are rooted in beliefs about effective teaching and learning. Descriptions of six activities leading to social responsibility concludes the booklet. (CK)

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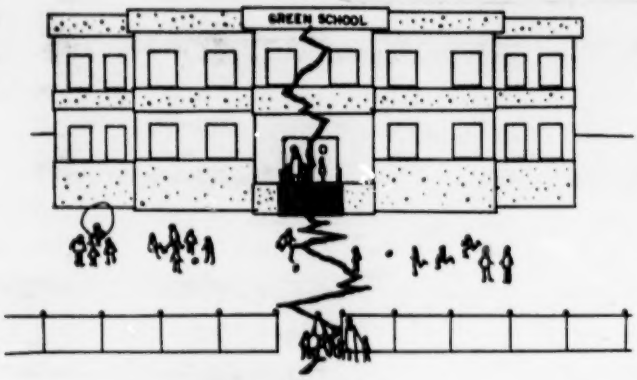

Dealing with Differences
Conflict Resolution in Our Schools

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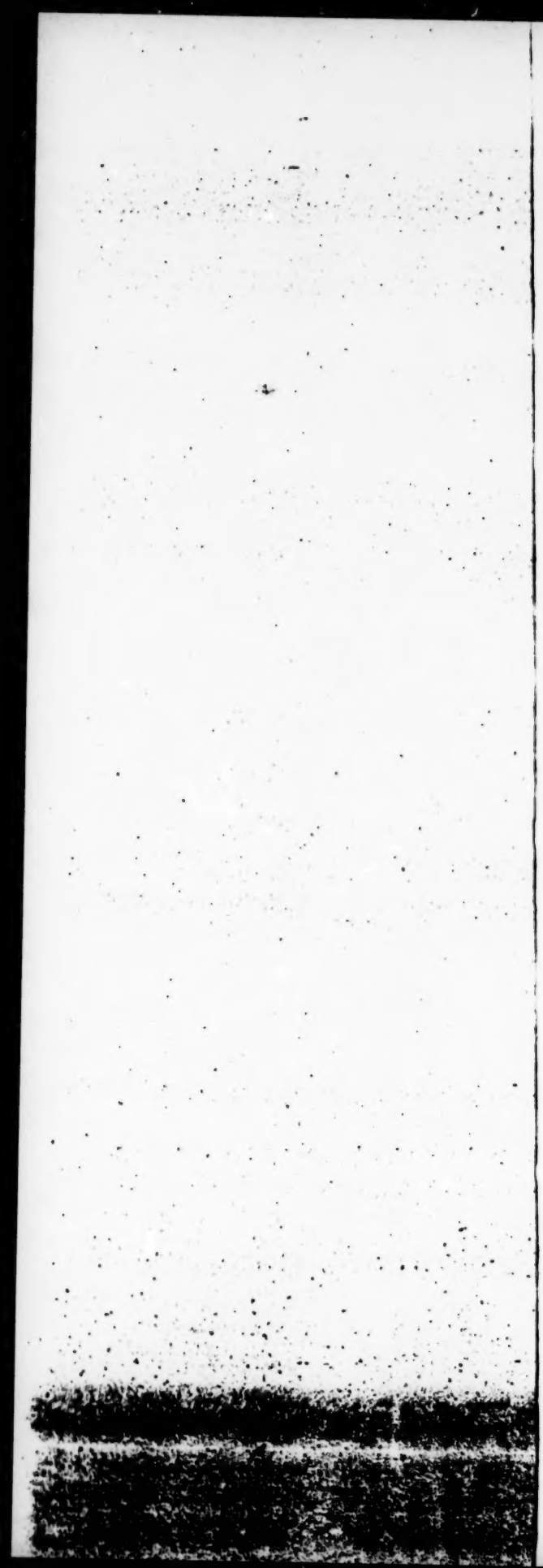


ESR seeks to make social responsibility an integral part of education. It perceives social responsibility to be an integrating framework for a variety of activities that will help young people learn how to participate in shaping a better world. One such activity is conflict resolution.

The ideas in this booklet were forged through years of ESR leaders' experience in helping educators introduce creative and effective ways of dealing with conflict into their classrooms and schools. ESR's approach to conflict resolution has many roots. While it is not possible to trace all of these roots, certain key contributions and benchmarks are worth noting.

Early in the 1980s, our experience teaching the skills of critical analysis for examining the arms race led quickly to the realization that students needed to understand the process of peacemaking. The curriculum guide, *Perspectives: A Teaching Guide to Concepts of Peace*, compiled by over thirty educators, was published in 1983. It included a section designed to help students learn conflict resolution skills for helping to create a more peaceful world.

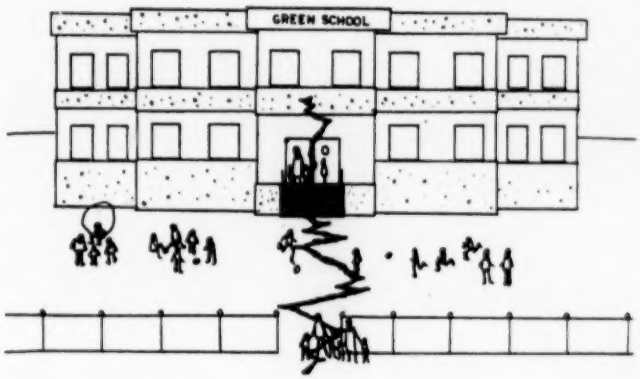
Also during the 1980s, a group of ESR leaders adapted Peter Elbow's technique for teaching writing, called methodological belief, to develop a process for more deeply understanding different perspectives on emotion-laden, controversial topics. This process helps people listen to and talk to each other about conflict in new ways.

During this period ESR reached teachers with its ideas in two ways. It developed a wealth of practical activities which it introduced to teachers through printed materials and workshops, and it enabled teachers to gain a deeper understanding of conflict resolution through weeklong institutes. Both activities enriched our own understanding of the varied dimensions of conflict resolution work.

Another major source of ESR's approach to conflict resolution began in 1985 when New York Metro ESR and the New York City Public Schools launched a project in one school district in Brooklyn to prepare elementary teachers in conflict resolution. This project, now named the "Resolving Conflict Creatively Program," has grown to encompass over 100 schools in New York City. It focuses on conflict resolution and intergroup relations. It has added student mediation and parent components, and it has expanded into the high schools as well.

A small group of individuals played a key role in shaping and refining the description in this booklet. They include Shelley Berman, Ruth Bowman, Larry Dieringer, Emma Gonzalez, William Kreidler, Linda Lantieri, Tom Roderick, and Steve Weimar, all of whose original writing and careful thought about dealing with differences are reflected throughout this material. Appreciation is also due to the members of ESR's 1990 Program Leaders Group who provided valuable feedback to a draft of this booklet.

Conflict Resolution



The Need

Conflict is a normal and essential part of life. The way we deal with differences and conflict, however, often divides us and inhibits our ability to confront common problems. Complex social issues and increasing global interdependence place new demands on our capacities to work together.

Many young people are not learning to deal constructively with differences that they face daily. They see few alternatives to either fleeing from conflict or fighting.

Violence has become a social problem of epidemic proportions that especially affects young people. The messages that society conveys about violence are at best confusing, and often encourage violence. Many young people do not believe that they can make a difference and improve the world in which they live.

Key Concepts

ESR conflict resolution programs reflect the following principles and understanding about conflict:

1. Conflict is a part of life. When handled constructively, conflict presents opportunities for growth and progress. People of any age can acquire skills and understandings that will help them to deal with conflict in constructive ways.

2. There are many conflict situations where "win-win" solutions—those that meet the underlying interests and needs of the parties to the dispute—can be achieved. Too often we assume that one person must win and the other must lose in a conflict, or that both must give up something, and thus neither get what they need or want.

3. While the win-win approach can be helpful in a great many situations, resolution of a conflict is not always possible. In some cases, the best outcome to a conflict-laden situation might be a strategy that prevents the outbreak of physical violence or the rupture of a relationship. Conflict can even be an important resource in the effort to bring about constructive change. The primary goal is to be creative and resourceful in the face of conflict.

4. Conflict resolution is best taught in the context of a caring community characterized by cooperation, effective communication, emotional strength, appreciation of differences, recognition of common purposes, and shared decision making. A singular focus on conflict resolution knowledge and skills without attention to creating community may miss underlying causes of problems. Caring and empathy are as important as knowing how to negotiate.

5. The ability to enter other perspectives, to see and feel problems as others do and identify their needs and interests, is central to dealing constructively with differences.

6. *Dialogue* is an effective form for discussing controversial issues. Dialogue, as contrasted with debate, emphasizes seeking common ground rather than polarizing differences. It encourages empathy with other points of view, and toleration for ambiguity and the uncertainty of knowledge. Debate is characterized by confrontation, a contest between right and wrong in which each side believes it is right. The typical goal of debate is to win the argument and end the discussion. Dialogue encourages people with differences to keep talking and increases the chances of creative responses to conflict.

7. While the interventions used in interpersonal conflicts and in larger social conflicts are often quite different, the study of each helps students begin to understand the underlying dynamics of conflict and further develop a positive attitude toward it. The development of interpersonal conflict skills, principles, experience, and concepts sets the foundation for effective responses to conflict in social and political spheres.

8. It is important to cultivate awareness of and appreciation for differences—individual, ethnic, cultural and national differences. Commonly, the perception of difference leads to separation and distancing. However, given emerging understanding of the world's interdependent character, differences must be understood in their interrelatedness, and in the opportunities they often present for creating new, more inclusive and adaptive relationships. Responding effectively to conflict necessitates learning to balance respect for differences with an ability to make informed judgments.

9. The roots of violence and social conflict often lie in inequality and injustice. It is important to help students understand and confront such deeply rooted problems as racism and sexism. In part, this takes place through examination and, where needed, transformation of existing power relationships in social conflicts.

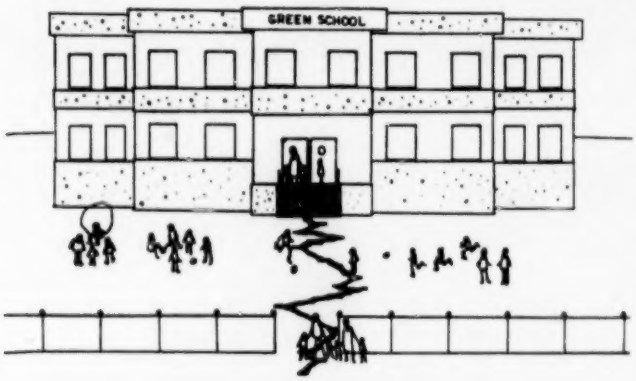
There are many dimensions to conflict. While physical violence is the most obvious, other forms of structural and institutional violence are also pernicious and equally demand our attention.

ESR's Approach: Distinguishing Features

ESR's approach to conflict resolution is based on the following principles which are rooted in beliefs about effective teaching and learning:

1. To see conflict as presenting opportunity for growth requires a significant shift in attitude and world view. Adults as well as students must examine and seek to change their own attitudes about conflict. This process requires time and patience. It also necessitates support for those teachers who are involved. Significant behavioral change in the classroom does not result from a "quick fix."

2. Effective teaching about conflict is student-centered—that is, it begins with students' experiences of conflict and their own questions. It addresses the conflict and violence in young people's lives. It helps young people make connections between their lives and the larger world and to apply new understandings to conflicts outside of their immediate experience.



3. ESR encourages young people to think about *why* there are different kinds of conflict and to explore a repertoire of effective responses; to pose problems and generate good questions; to recognize that society is created by people and can be changed by people; and to believe that they can make a difference.

4. ESR encourages inquiry and exploration of complex issues that leads to underlying assumptions, root causes, and internal contradictions. Thoughtful inquiry involves risk taking, for it may raise fundamental questions about the way we live and how our society is structured.

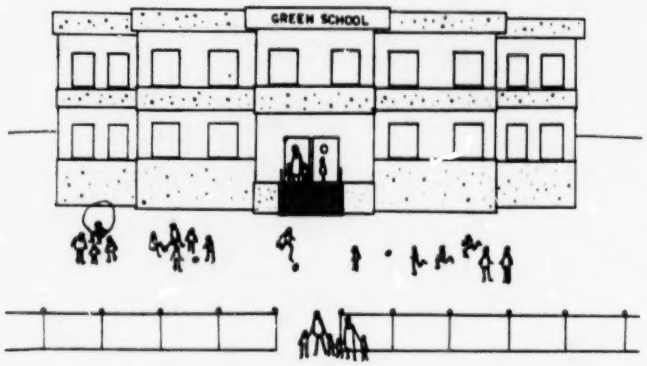
5. A comprehensive approach to conflict resolution education involves teachers in the application of understanding and skills at three levels: as reflected in classroom management; through direct instruction of conflict resolu-

tion; and through infusion of conflict resolution analysis into subject areas such as literature, social studies, and science.

6. Many programs teach conflict resolution as a set of isolated skills. Although individual skills are useful, the practice of creative response to conflict entails more than a collection of isolated skills; it is an integrative process that happens when one is confronted with a real problem. It also involves a systematic way of thinking about dealing with differences.

7. ESR helps teachers create structured learning environments characterized by: a willingness to embrace and use conflict for learning; a sense of being safe to express feelings and different opinions, and to change one's mind and behavior; a commitment to share power and control so that students are partners with teachers in creating knowledge and making decisions; reflection about self and others; and opportunities for young people and adults to connect with each other and form relationships.

8. Other programs focus on stopping fighting and physical violence, and controlling behavior. ESR believes that conflict resolution in education is not simply another form of discipline. ESR's goal involves going deeper. It includes empowering young people



by providing them with a repertoire of skills and nurturing new ways of thinking about dealing with differences and conflict.

9. Based on our experience working with schools across the United States, we recommend several components to a successful implementation strategy for a conflict resolution education program: in-depth introductory staff training; use of exemplary curriculum; follow-up classroom visits by staff development specialists; periodic meetings of all involved staff; and leadership development programs for qualified participants. Training and support are central—ESR's approach is not "curriculum-centered." ESR structures participatory learning experiences for adults that mirror the empowering methodology we recommend for young people.

10. Conflict resolution in the schools often takes the form of mediation programs. ESR believes that school mediation programs are best implemented as part of a larger effort to train staff and students in conflict resolution. While mediation programs are valuable for many young people, they often are separate from the cultures of classrooms and the school at large, where prevailing norms among students *and* teachers do not support the goals of the mediation program. Also, while third party intervention (mediation) is an important form of dispute resolution, it does not necessarily help individuals develop abilities to manage and resolve differences on their own.

11. ESR frames its conflict resolution work as central to the process by which young people become responsible decision makers and active participants in our democracy. Students need skills, understanding, and opportunities to make a difference in the world. The ability to deal constructively with differences is a fundamental part of effective citizenship.

Conflict resolution is one of a variety of activities integrated by the framework of social responsibility. ESR is dedicated to deepening our own and our fellow educators' understanding of each of these activities in a fashion similar to that undertaken for conflict resolution in this booklet. By so doing, we plan to give shape to the field of social responsibility.

In the belief that it will interest those practicing conflict resolution, we describe briefly below some other activities our experience thus far leads us to perceive as constituting the skills and perspectives of social responsibility.

Controversial Issues. The significant issues of our time are controversial. Therefore, it is vital that these issues be considered in schools, so that students can practice learning how to decide what to do in complex, emotion-laden situations. Without such practice, they are left with the models they see around them, which tend to encourage polarizing and oversimplifying.

Dialogue. In dialogue the effort is to understand each other's position—not only the intellectual content, but also the history and emotions tied to the position. Done well, this approach leads to an increased understanding of a given situation that permits a partnership approach in critical thinking and an attempt to collaborate in devising a "win-win" solution to the conflict. In debate, by contrast, the emphasis is on attacking the intellectual content of an opponent's position to achieve a "win" at the opponent's expense.

Multiple Perspectives. There are typically more than "two sides to every story." One of the most important means of helping students reflect on their own thinking is to help them reach beyond the limits of their own experience and to enter the experience of others.

Interconnectedness. Preparing young people for the twenty-first century means helping them to develop an understanding of how to live in an interdependent world. Students need to be encouraged to view situations holistically, examining the interconnections between parts of a system rather than focusing on one cause and one effect.

Opportunities for Participation. Learning is strengthened when it is embodied in action, so it is vital to give students opportunities to contribute to the lives of others and to improve the world around them. Depending on their maturity, students can be appropriately involved in taking action on classroom, school, community, national, or global problems. Providing such opportunities helps students to improve the quality of their thinking and to build self-esteem and a sense of connection with the world.

Community. Developing a sense of community—a consciousness of the group of which one is a part—means acknowledging our interconnectedness, having a sense of common purpose, respecting differences, sharing in decision making, and supporting each other's growth. To enable young people to acquire this perspective, we must be willing and able to create classrooms and schools that function as communities.

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